

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUND NO. 5-5473
CHARLES MEDD

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COALMINERS STRIKES GOES ON

ANNCR:

NEGOTIATION IN THE NATION-WIDE COAL STRIKE, NOW IN ITS EIGHTH WEEK, BROKE DOWN TUESDAY (JANUARY 24) WHEN THE UNITED MINeworkERS REJECTED THE LATEST OFFER FROM THE MINE OPERATORS. CHARLES MEDD HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT ON WHAT NOW IS CERTAIN TO BE THE LONGEST COAL STRIKE IN THIS COUNTRY SINCE WORLD WAR TWO.

VOICE:

FOR NEARLY TWO MONTHS, THE TALKS HAVE BOGGED DOWN ON A SINGLE ISSUE -- WHAT TO DO ABOUT THOSE WILDCAT (UNAUTHORIZED) STRIKES THAT HAVE INTERRUPTED COAL PRODUCTION ON A REGULAR BASIS IN RECENT YEARS. THE COMPANIES INSIST ON SOME WAY TO DISCIPLINE MINERS WHO FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER SIMPLY DECIDE NOT TO WORK. AND BECAUSE THESE UNAUTHORIZED WALKOUTS HAVE BECOME AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE UNITED MINeworkERS, THE UNION, TOO, IS LOOKING FOR SOME WAY TO KEEP ITS MEMBERS ON THE JOB.

THE WILDCAT STRIKE ISSUE IS FURTHER COMPLICATED BY ITS EFFECT ON THE UNION'S WELFARE PROGRAMS WHICH ARE FINANCED BY DIRECT CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE COMPANIES FOR EACH TON OF COAL PRODUCED BY UNION MINERS. BY CUTTING INTO PRODUCTION, THE STRIKES HAVE HURT THE VERY PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE MEDICAL CARE FOR ACTIVE MINERS AND THEIR FAMILIES AND PENSIONS FOR RETIRED MINERS.

FROM THE START, UNION NEGOTIATORS HAVE INSISTED THAT THE COMPANIES GUARANTEE THE SOLVENCY OF THE WELFARE PLANS, NOW, OF COURSE, UNDER GREATER STRAIN BECAUSE OF THE PRESENT STRIKE OVER A NEW THREE-YEAR CONTRACT. EARLY THIS WEEK, THE COMPANIES, IN A COMPROMISE MOVE, AGREED TO MAINTAIN HEALTH AND PENSION BENEFITS

IF THE UNION WOULD ACCEPT A NEW DISCIPLINARY PLAN. THAT PLAN WOULD REQUIRE MINERS WHO TAKE PART IN WILDCAT STRIKES TO PAY INTO THE WELFARE FUNDS FROM THEIR OWN POCKETS WHAT THEIR EMPLOYERS WOULD HAVE PAID HAD THE MINERS WORKED.

THE NEGOTIATIONS BROKE OFF WHEN THE UNION REJECTED THE OFFER. IRONICALLY, THE MAN WHO SAID NO -- MINEWORKERS PRESIDENT ARNOLD MILLER -- WANTS MORE STABILITY IN THE COAL FIELDS AS MUCH AS THE OPERATORS DO. BUT MILLER, WHO WAS BARELY RE-ELECTED LAST YEAR, ENJOYS VERY LITTLE POLITICAL STABILITY WITHIN HIS UNION--A MAJOR REASON, OBSERVERS BELIEVE, WHY HE COULD NOT ACCEPT FINANCIAL PENALTIES FOR ABSENTEE WORKERS.

DESPITE THE LATEST IMPASSE, THERE ARE NO IMMEDIATE COAL SHORTAGES, PARTLY BECAUSE OF PRE-STRIKE STOCKPILING BY COAL USERS AND ALSO BECAUSE NEARLY HALF THE NATION'S COAL IS PRODUCED BY NON-UNION MINERS. IF AN EMERGENCY ARISES, THE PRESIDENT CAN ORDER UNION WORKERS TO RETURN TO THEIR JOBS -- A STEP THE WHITE HOUSE WOULD LIKE TO AVOID, FOR THE INDEPENDENT AMERICAN COAL MINER, WHO FREELY DEFIES HIS EMPLOYER AND HIS UNION, IS NO LESS LIKELY TO DEFY HIS GOVERNMENT.

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